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RADICALISM AND REFORM.

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In connection with every phase of thought and activity among men there have appeared two distinct classes of minds, the optimists and the pessimists. The former are naturally Conservatives as the latter are Radicals. These minds are always considered as extremes in their day and generation and we find these opposite poles of thought protruding in either direction beyond the settled convictions of the masses.

First, let me point out a distinction between Radicalism and Conservatism in the most general idea of them. There is a sort of Conservatism which stands only upon advantages held in possession. It says: "I have wealth, I have respectability, I am well off here and well guaranteed for the hereafter. Any change, good or bad in itself, will be bad for me. Change is my enemy: I bolt and bar my doors and, so far as I can, the doors of the world against it." There is, on the other hand, a sort of Radicalism which, though often a fair thing in the mouth, means in the heart of it; "You are in place and I am out. You have and I want. Any change gives me a chance, and the more change, the better are my chances."

For more than a century there has been a vast movement of mind in the western world which now receives the general name of Radicalism, or, going back to the beginning of Radicalism in modern history, we should fix the time of its appearance when Martin Luther attached certain daring theses to the gates of the council church of Wittenberg. In the next century it assumed shape in English and New English Puritanism, in the next played a subordinate part in the American Revolution, while in France it became meantime a speculative mania, warring in the name of reason on all the higher antecedent experience of humanity. Which mania, getting to be practical, broke out in the immeasurable frenzy of the Revolution of 1789.

Now the old Radicals were distinguished by some well marked mental and moral characteristics. Their creed was, to put it briefly, that the whole social order ought to be based on a few universal and self-evident propositions.

From certain maxims and assumptions they deduced a scheme of polity which they believed with all the earnestness of unshakable conviction. Such things as custom or tradition or even expediency they deemed of small account. They began by assuming that there are certain natural rights or rights of man, and from these they concluded that certain consequences, such as universal suffrage, must necessarily follow.

To-day, the written constitutions which were regarded as so many bulwarks of individual rights and of certain fundamental principles, are found to be either somewhat hampering to progress or are liable to be stretched in interpretation so as to cover accomplished facts. We do not now think of a fixed order,—of a state of things in which no great changes are to be made. In other words, we have arrived at a different conception of human progress from that entertained by the Radicals of old. The notion of definite creation is abandoned, both in science and in politics, and has been replaced by the idea of organic growth.

There is not a principle, however sound and excellent when tempered with the necessary qualifications, which does not become false and pernicious when pushed to excess and exalted above all exception to a sweeping generality. It was a wise observation of Aristotle: "That in courses respecting our duties sweeping doctrines are more doubtful, limited ones more true, since our duties always relate to specific things."

But the would-be reformers of the Radical type are too much in haste to stop for the slow processes of induction and the gradual teaching of experience. They must have everything done at once.

They have a newly invented panacea for the evils of the body politic, a universal elixir to preserve it in perpetuity. All the complicated and jarring elements of men's natures and social relations are to be brought into an order so exact and a

harmony so perfect and peaceful that a little child might lead them.

With them the problems of statesmanship are very simple. They believe that it is only necessary to comprehend and to apply the laws of nature and the maxims of morality, and that there are wanted but half a dozen honest men to save a city. From such premises they go to the furthest logical extremes, they hold all compromise to be immoral and that to be moderate in principle is, in fact, to be unprincipled.

If the prevailing nature of the old Radicalism is considered, it will also be found to have been Puritan in the fullest sense of the word, and by Puritanism is meant a certain, high, unbending and always non-materialistic way of looking at life and approaching great questions. The true Puritan looks rather to the ends and purposes of things than to the pleasures of the moment.

The old Radical spirit was hard, earnest, unyielding, and based deep in a traditional Puritanism. As often as not, the old Radicals were men of strong religious conviction and deep piety. Even when they did not belong to some form of Non-conformity and took Tom Paine for their gospel, they were essentially serious-minded men.

Very different is the type of Radicalism now in the ascendant; the new Radical is as essentially unpuritanical as his prototype was puritanical. He is as hungry for pleasure and the lightening of the burden of life as the other was to improve his moral and intellectual status. He wants a good time in the most natural sense and a pleasant life of the kind that a great city provides.

The old Radical used to be sneered at as a person incapable of luxury, and therefore unable to sympathize with his fellow man in his desire for amusement. The new Radical knows no such incapacity. He is distinctly capable of luxury and means to have it. It is not so much that the new Radical is irreligious, as that he is non-religious. Religion, either in the way of attack or defense, does not attract or interest him: he leaves it on one side as something outside the range of pressing practical questions that interest him, or else he looks on it as an

entirely extinct volcano, a thing for gentle laughter and good-natured contempt.

In any case, I wish to point out that the religious element is gone, and with it the temper of the idealist. This lack of Puritan paste in his composition makes the Radical of to-day merely enthusiastic rather than earnest. He will grow sentimental over objects that interest him, but he does not exhibit that power of taking hold of an idea and freezing to it which characterized the old Radical.

It would, of course, be unfair to attack Radicalism on this ground, or to speak as if it were something peculiar to it to take the materialistic view of life. This hunger after comfort has invaded every class and is quite as rife among the rich and fairly well-to-do as among the poor. It is to be regretted, but it is none the less true, that as a whole we have lost the old Puritan austerity and earnestness and turned towards the delights of bodily comfort, towards an amusing and joyous life rather than one of intellectual and moral interests. The people may not be in the least more criminal or more immoral, but unquestionably they are, as a whole, more set on having a good time than they were.

Now, no movement in social reform which entirely ignores religion and the religious needs of the nation, in the long run, prevails. For a time it may appear to catch on, but in the end, the want of the religious element will be felt and will bring it to ruin. It may do very well for a time, but the vitality which the religious spirit alone supplies is soon found to be lacking and there is a collapse.

Radicalism may be very proud of the fact that it is entirely unconnected with religion to-day, but in the end it will find that fact, not a strength, but a weakness.

Radicalism is characterized less by its principles than by the manner of their application. Its political doctrine is that of democracy and as a general thing liberal men will approve of it. And though democracy may be the parent of Radicalism, this is no dishonor to the parent. Democratic ideas in a justly liberal sense must necessarily have some offshoots which are deformed, because so many persons can appreciate mere license who cannot appreciate true liberty.

There is something of paradox, yet more of truth, in the remark of Burke "that in proportion as certain doctrines are metaphysically true they are practically and politically false."

They keep the mind always dwelling on first principles, contemplating extreme cases; they keep society always in its elements; they are always beginning; always laying the foundations, by admitting nothing on the authority of their predecessors, every generation must make the world over again; there can be no such thing as a steady advance from age to age. Your Radical never regards government as something to live under, in peaceful contentment, but as something to be made and unmade.

Who would raise the slightest objection against Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and the responsibility of power, universal suffrage, even? But what are you to understand by "Liberty"? Should it be the universal leveling of all social enjoyments to the plane of the lowest class? Should fraternity encourage idleness and vice? Should national sovereignty and the responsibility of power constitute a permanent insurrection and take away the right of decision from peaceable majorities to confer it upon turbulent minorities? Does universal suffrage admit of absolutely no limit?

The Radical rushes into every innovating enterprise without waiting to inquire whither it leads. The reformer, cherishing a profound love and veneration for the institutions under which he is living, seeks their amendment only, not their subversion. The Radical, extending his condemnation from the abuses of these institutions to the institutions themselves, would gladly witness their overthrow. The one, aware that the balance of the social state can not be insured without some abridgment of the privileges of a state of nature, cheerfully submits to the restrictions placed upon his personal rights. The other is perpetually at war with these restrictions, though society could not exist without them. The Reformer, tracing the evils of the social state to their true fountain in the depravity of the heart, and aiming at a permanent cure, resorts to those notions of education and religion adapted to effect a radical change in the human mind, and thus applies his remedies to the seat of the disease.

Such are the general attributes by which Radicalism is contrasted with the right mode of reform. It has zeal without knowledge where knowledge is most of all requisite. Radical reformers are always driving with all their forces at some one object, in comparison with which, whatever may be its real value, they deem everything else insignificant. In the earlier stages of their efforts, they are seen groping after some simple, unqualified principle on which their own mind can rest and by which they can act upon the public. And, since they care nothing for that depth and sagacity of mind which would enable them to discern the true bounds of principles, how far they apply and where and when the application of them fails, they soon arrive at some unlimited generality of doctrine and their business, thenceforward, is to carry it into effect, even in cases where its application, to the unsophisticated mind, must appear plainly unjust and pernicious.

It is submitted to the reflecting student whether this is not the course pursued by many of the reformers of the present day. As has been said recently by an eminent authority :

“ They have perverted democracy into a despotism of demagogues; divorced political power from political burdens; substituted centralization for self-government; universal interference and legislative regulation for individual liberty and freedom of contract; the dictation of the majority for personal independence; phrases for principles; popularity-hunting for public spirit; cosmopolitan theories for patriotic traditions.”

It would be endless to trace all the ways in which this lack of sober judgment and common sense is betrayed by the Radical reformers. One of the most common is to overlook all obstacles to the speedy triumph of their cause. Says Paine, in the Second Part of his *Rights of Man*, “ I do not believe that monarchy and aristocracy will continue seven years longer in any of the enlightened countries of Europe.”

It belongs to the very idea of the Radical to be self-confident and dogmatical,—intolerant of adverse opinion. He is always aroused by the mention of the word “ Reform,” always enthusiastic over any new movement, no matter what name

it may take or what it proposes to do. He sees the millenium dawning on the land every time a new departure is taken. If he can only see some kind of a change, he does not care much what it is, so long as it is new and claims to be progressive.

The habit of extreme generalization applied to the subject of natural rights furnished Rousseau and Paine with those unlimited maxims which captivated the common mind with their clearness, and, when carried into application, produced the French Revolution.

And through the fond credulity of our nature, when we hear one loudly professing his sympathy with the suffering or see him making a show of unwonted zeal in a good cause, we are apt to take him at his word and to believe him to be as much more humane and philanthropic than other men as he pretends to be.

This credulity, or to name it more justly, gullibility of human nature is one of the chief instruments by which impostors of every sort promote their ends, and it is by no means necessary that one should possess great ability or render eminent public services in order to reach a high place in public estimation. However moderate may be his talents and however little he may have done for the public good, he will yet be taken by the great world to excel others as much in merit as he can surpass them in bustle and display.

Hence it is that some men of the worst character, by putting forth specious professions, often reap from the public a harvest of golden opinions, while the truly deserving are left with no reward except the satisfaction of their own sense of duty well performed.

The fact that Radicalism, as often formulated by its leaders, meets among the working classes a very wide reception proves, indeed, that the Radicals are spreading something, but it does not prove that what they are spreading is Radicalism. What I here seek to point out is that the thing which is uttered by them with a certain aim and with a certain meaning, takes on another meaning as it enters the ears of the working classes, and presents to their minds aims of quite a different kind.

Radicalism is, in this respect, rather an antagonism than a

principle. It has less of political desire or of aspiration than of the spirit of contest against privilege. It would be absurd to suppose that the ordinary Radical argued politics or considered them on scientific principles, so much as with piqued feelings and with resentment. The main idea is to pull down and not to build up. There may be a dominance of principle in a small minority but there is a dominance of feeling in the great majority.

Radicalism, speaking loosely, is hatred of class privilege. It is a sentiment which is fanned by discontent.

This brings us down to the bed-rock truth that only as a people grow better and wiser do they make intelligent progress toward the higher social state. The great task before reformers is to forward the mental, moral and spiritual revolution involved in their ideal. This accomplished, all other reforms are easy.

Although wealth has increased enormously, the condition of the poor, especially in large cities, has not improved, but has become harder. This very progress, leading to more extravagant habits and to ever-increasing accumulations of population in large cities, has, in some respects, aggravated the condition of large masses, who, either from their own fault or the fault of circumstances, have fallen out of the ranks and form the waifs and stragglers of the army of industry.

There is, then, much justification for those who are striving for social ameliorations which, even if unattainable, are humane in their intention and desirable in their end. Nor should we lightly discourage the spirit which busies itself in philanthropic speculation, for we deem it fortunate for our republican system, in these days when commercial considerations have become so largely the measure of political action, that some ardent spirits exist, who carry their ideas to the verge of extravagance. They invigorate and preserve the sacred flame which otherwise might become dim and even extinct. They quicken those whose devotion might otherwise become sluggish from their absorption in sordid pursuits and material occupations. Their too ardent zeal serves to check and counterbalance the opposite tendency to anti-liberal opinions,

which, under every form of government, exists in the very nature of many men.

If one man is a leveler in opinion, another is a monarchist in feeling, so that there is a counterbalancing weight on either side, and it is chiefly on the more sluggish mass of his own party the Radical exerts a salutary influence.

It deeply concerns all of us as citizens that all the great tendencies of human thought are rushing to this issue between Radicalism and Conservatism, between the interests of the many and of the few, between peoples and plutocracies, between humanity and every power that denies its claim.

We have taken into our own hands the powers of government; we are directly, personally, every one of us, responsible for the exercise of it, and if we continue to be, as we seem to have been, insensible to the magnitude of the trust, if we proudly claim to be free citizen electors without thoughtfully and conscientiously performing the duties of electors, if we vote factiously or will not vote at all, if, beneath the majestic frame of a free representative government the only thought of our citizens is to play out their own little game of private ambition, of money-getting and pleasure-seeking,—only freer than other peoples to be more selfish and self-willed,—if the arena dedicated to sacred Freedom is given over to violent and unscrupulous party contests, if demagogues are to be our great men and the wise and thinking are to shrink back or be driven back by the crowd,—then, I say, official conduct and morality will continue to run down, and our general government will become what some of our city governments now are, and the time will come when majorities may be more oppressive than despots and we shall be ready to flee from the many-headed monster, as did the Roman Republic, to a one-man power.

In the economy of reformation there is greater need of the moderate, prudent, judicious men, than of those freer spirits who throw themselves into the front rank and make the most noise. The former are necessary to restrain the hot passions of the over-zealous, and to give consistency and permanency to the results of their actions.

The essential thing is that we retain and make our own all

things which we have proved to be good and true. The fault of many who call themselves Radicals is not that they so readily accept new phases of truth, or what claims to be such, but rather their persistence in trying to overthrow everything that is old.

Instead of trying to get to the roots of things for the sake of testing their genuineness, they frequently attempt to pull everything up by the roots. Such a destructive disposition is the greatest enemy of human progress. As Phillips Brooks says: "Radicalism is not tearing things up by the roots, but getting down to the roots of things and planting institutions anew on just principles." All reform should have regard for righteousness and good government and should set aside the old forms and traditions only as it shall appear that they have no just and defensible reason for their existence.

The time is now ripe for the systematic organization of the progressive forces for the real business of politics. There is work enough and to spare for every section of social reformers.

But it should be born in mind by those who are emulous of forming and directing the public sentiment by abstract propositions and general rules, that however clear may be their evidence, and however mighty and irresistible their influence for a season, especially with the mass of unenlightened and unreflecting minds, they can never form a permanent basis for the success of any cause. Their falsity will soon begin to be surmised from the consequences they involve; it will, ere long, be deeply felt, and, at length, fully detected and exposed. Common sense must, sooner or later, rebel against the tyranny of all exclusive and extravagant dogmas, and will then avenge itself by holding up to universal contempt the figment by which it had been so long blinded and suppressed. Reaction of this kind must inevitably follow whenever the fixed limits of nature and truth are overstepped by the abstract refinements of sophisticated reformers.

The real life, the real wealth of the nation, consists in things that cannot be written down, in the unwritten and unformulated feelings that exist between class and class. The nation is great and strong in which these feelings are feelings of

mutual trust; and when each class feels and knows its own duties.

Radical views are dangerous because they nurture a spirit of discontent, of morbid excitement, of restlessness and change. They teach utter recklessness of consequences, a disregard of existing institutions, a contempt of authority, prescription, usage, and whatever in the majesty of government is venerable.

It is, perhaps, for all these reasons that Rohmer attributes to Radicalism the nature of the boy. It has the same capacity, as well as the same defects. It is enthusiastic, imaginative, to a certain extent generous, lives in an ideal world pursuing a single idea, and pursuing it frantically without regard to the evils caused by its efforts to realize it. Happily, the idea pursued is often a good one, the realization of which compensates, more or less, for the ills which it has caused. Only one thing remains to be desired, namely, that the end be not attained with such violence as to go beyond it and give rise to a reaction which shall call everything into question again.